



Sponsor Lt. Col. Joe Jarzombek
801-777-2435 DSN 777-2435
jarzombj@software.hill.af.mil

Publisher Reuel S. Alder
801-777-2550 DSN 777-2550
alderr@software.hill.af.mil

Managing Editor Tracy Stauder
801-777-9239 DSN 777-9239
staudert@software.hill.af.mil

Senior Editor Sandi Gaskin
801-777-9722 DSN 777-9722
gaskins@software.hill.af.mil

Graphics and Design Kent Hepworth
801-775-5555 ext. 3027
hepworth@software.hill.af.mil

Associate Editor Lorin J. May
801-775-5555 ext. 3026
mayl@software.hill.af.mil

Editorial Assistant Bonnie May
801-775-5555 ext. 3023
mayb@software.hill.af.mil

Features Coordinator Heather Winward
801-775-5555 ext. 3028
winwardh@software.hill.af.mil

Customer Service 801-777-8045 DSN 777-8045
custserv@software.hill.af.mil

Fax 801-777-8069 DSN: 777-8069

STSC On-Line <http://www.stsc.hill.af.mil>

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Ogden ALC/TISE
7278 Fourth Street
Hill AFB, UT 84056-5205

E-mail: custserv@software.hill.af.mil
Voice: 801-777-8045, DSN 777-8045
Fax: 801-777-8069, DSN 777-8069

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Barbershop Training: No Results for Less Money

I've been a professional corporate trainer for nearly seven years, although I didn't realize it until recently. Technically, my title has been "singer in a semiprofessional quartet," but it turns out we've been doing exactly what trainers do all along. I'm not talking about training in programming languages or technologies—we are best qualified to train people in your organization's next program or edict. But before our sales pitch, I'll use my own experiences to explain the importance of training.

I have no experience with software training, but I received great training when I sold home electronics for a national retailer. I realize that retail sales and software engineering are worlds apart—in retail sales, the effectiveness of front-line workers has a huge impact on profitability—but there are some important similarities.

For example, you may think selling TVs and stereos involves nothing more than bluffing about product features and implying that most products tend to explode into flames if you don't buy an extended service plan. However, there are many technical aspects, such as how to steal sales from co-workers and how to avoid lawsuits while insinuating to customers that the competition, for entertainment, likes to push old ladies in front of moving buses. So for this *part-time* job, the company gave me four weeks of full-time paid training in every imaginable sales technique and product feature, knowing it would pay big dividends. It matters little that I quit before they could make back their training investment, because we shouldn't carry this analogy too far—after all, the retail industry has a big problem with employee turnover.

Yet, despite great returns such as these, many managers are tight with their training dollars, and sometimes ignore the basics. For example, I was fresh out of college when I got a job creating artsy how-to books. I realize the publishing industry is also world's apart from software programming—publishing is a deadline-, coordination-, and process-intensive field where any oversight can become an expensive embarrassment—but if you use your imagination, there's a lesson here. The following near-verbatim excerpt shows my former boss' mistaken attitude about training, although I'm certain software managers would never be this shortsighted:

Boss: "We need you to quickly create these five books that cover topics you know nothing about. Use these programs you've never seen and follow our strict processes, which we won't explain."

Me: "... ah, all right. Who can show me how to—"

Boss: "—Oh, so we get to hold your hand, 'Mr. Qualified'? Let's see some initiative! Well, that does it for your training—if you have any questions, feel free to rudely interrupt something important."

The problem? Many managers believe that if employees have skill and "initiative" (manager code for "clairvoyance"), they don't need training. But at my next publishing job, I learned that even seasoned employees need regular training. Among other duties, I had to get "old-school" people to use new software and computers. At first I thought they would resist learning new ways to do their jobs, but after a cycle of training, mentoring, and hands-on experience, within a year they were all proficient on the new system, which they subsequently ignored. And then we were all laid off.

So I can't overemphasize the long-term benefits of training—which brings me to my sales pitch. For years, businesses and professional groups have hired my quartet to perform at banquets and parties. See if what we've been doing resembles any session where your organization has covered a company program, process, or policy.

Picture a roomful of professionals who are there only because their bosses made them go. Someone in a high position stands up and drones on for a few minutes, occasionally blurting out words like "vision" or "excellence." Eventually, the performers (read: "trainers") are introduced, who then put on a well-choreographed presentation, interspersed with corny jokes. The person who paid for this sits in rapt attention, while the rest nervously glance at their watches and try not bang their heads on the table too loudly when they fall asleep.

Sound familiar? To complete the transition from "singers" to "trainers," we'll just need to start handing out binders, which no one ever reads anyway. But our binders won't be stuffed away and forgotten—they'll be made of chocolate. Our half-hour of "training" will provide the measurable results of many of the training sessions you've been through: the trainers get paid, your boss is satisfied, and everybody leaves the room and continues with business as usual. Except that we're quick, cheap, and sometimes we're even asked to do an encore! Hire us now, and we'll throw in a free recording of our barbershop rendition of "Stairway to Heaven."

—Lorin May

Got an idea for BACKTALK? Send an E-mail to mayl@software.hill.af.mil